VISIT…

Chris Marker

A free replay (notes on *Vertigo*)

`Power and freedom'. Coupled together, these two words are repeated three times in *Vertigo*. First, at the twelfth minute by Gavin Elster ('freedom' underlined by a move to close-up) who, looking at a picture of Old San Francisco, expresses his nostalgia to Scottie ('San Francisco has changed. The things that spelled San Francisco to me are disappearing fast'), a nostalgia for a time when men - some men at least - had `power and freedom'. Second, at the thirty-fifth minute, in the bookstore, where `Pop' Liebel explains how Carlotta Valdes's rich lover threw her out yet kept her child: `Men could do that in those days. They had the power and the freedom ... ' And finally at the hundred and twenty-fifth minute - and fifty-first second to be precise - but in reverse order (which is logical, given we are now in the second part, on the other side of the mirror) by Scottie himself when, realizing the workings of the trap laid by the now free and powerful Elster, he says, a few seconds before Judy's fall - which, for him, will be Madeleine's second death -'with all his wife's money and all that freedom and power ... '.Just try telling me these are coincidences.

Such precise signs must have a meaning. Could it be psychological, an explanation of the criminal's motives? If so, the effort seems a little wasted on what is, after all, a secondary character. This strategic triad gave me the first inkling of a possible reading of *Vertigo*. The vertigo the film deals with isn't to do with space and falling; it is a clear, understandable and spectacular metaphor for yet another kind of vertigo, much more difficult to represent - the vertigo of time. Elster's `perfect' crime almost achieves the impossible: reinventing a time when men and women and San Francisco were different to what they are now. And its perfection, as with all perfection in Hitchcock, exists in duality. Scottie will absorb the folly of time with which Elster infuses him through Madeleine/Judy. But where Elster reduces the fantasy to mediocre manifestations (wealth, power, etc), Scottie transmutes it into its most utopian form: he overcomes the most irreparable damage caused by time and resurrects a love that is dead. The entire second part of the film, on the other side of the mirror, is nothing but a mad, maniacal attempt to deny time, to recreate through trivial yet necessary signs (like the signs of a liturgy: clothes, make-up, hair) the woman whose loss he has never been able to accept. His own feelings of responsibility and guilt for this loss are mere Christian Band-Aids dressing a metaphysical wound of much greater depth. Were one to quote the Scriptures, Corinthians I (an epistle one of Bergman's

characters uses to define love) would apply: `Death, where is your victory?'

So Elster infuses Scottie with the madness of time. It's interesting to see how this is done. As ever with Alfred, stratagems merely serve to hold up a mirror (and there are many mirrors in this story) to the hero and bring out his repressed desires. In *Strangers on a Train,* Bruno offers Guy the crime he doesn't dare desire. In *Vertigo,* Scottie, although overtly reluctant, is always willing, always the one taking the first step. Once in Gavin's office and again in front of his own house, (the morning after the fake drowning), the manipulators pretend to give up: Gavin sits down and apologizes for having asked the impossible; Madeleine gets back in the car and gets ready to leave. Everything could stop there. But, on both occasions, Scottie takes the initiative and restarts the machine. Gavin hardly has to persuade Scottie to undertake his search: he simply suggests that he see Madeleine, knowing full well that a glimpse of her will be enough to set the supreme manipulator, Destiny, in motion. After a shot of Madeleine, glimpsed at Ernie's, there follows a shot of Scottie beginning his stake-out of the Elster house. Acceptance (bewitchment) needs no scene of its own; it is contained in the fade to black between the two scenes. This is the first of three ellipses of essential moments, all avoided, which another director would have felt obliged to show. The second ellipse is in the first scene of physical love between Judy and Scottie, which clearly takes place in the hotel room after the last transformation (the hair-do corrected in the bathroom). How is it possible, after such a fabulous, hallucinatory moment, to sustain such intensity?

In this case, the censorship of the time saved Hitchcock from a doubly impossible situation. Such a scene can only exist in the imagination (or in life). But when a film has referred to fantasy only in the highly-coded context of dreams and two lovers embrace in the realist set of the hotel room; when one of them, Scottie, thanks to the most magical camera movement in the history of cinema, discovers another set around him, that of the stable at the Dolores Mission where he last kissed a wife whose double he has now created; isn't *that* scene the metaphor for the love scene Hitchcock cannot show? And if love is truly the only victor over time, isn't this scene per se *the* love scene? The third ellipse, which has long been the joy of connoisseurs, I'll mention for the sheer pleasure of it. It occurs much earlier, in the first part. We have just seen Scottie pull Madeleine unconscious out of San Francisco bay (at Fort Point). Fade to black. Scottie is at home, lighting a log fire. As he goes to sit down - the camera follows - he looks straight ahead. The camera follows his look and ends on Madeleine, seen through the open bedroom door, asleep in bed with a sheet up to her neck. But as the camera travels towards her, it also registers her clothes and underclothes hanging on a drier in the kitchen. The telephone rings and wakes her up. Scottie, who's come into the room, leaves, shutting the door. Madeleine reappears dressed in the red dressing-gown he happened to

have draped across the bed. Neither of them alludes to the intervening period, apart from the *double entendre* in Scottie's line the next day: `I enjoyed, er ... talking to you ... ' Three scenes, therefore, where imagination wins over representation; three moments, three keys which become locks, but which no present-day director would think of leaving out. On the contrary, he'd make them heavily explicit and, of course, banal. As a result of saying it can show anything, cinema has abandoned its power over the imagination. And, like cinema, this century is perhaps starting to pay a high price for this betrayal of the imagination - or, more precisely, those who still have an imagination, albeit a poor one, are being made to pay that price.

Double entendre? All the gestures, looks, phrases in *Vertigo* have a double meaning. Everybody knows that it is probably the only film where a `double' vision is not only advisable but indispensable for rereading the first part of the film in the light of the second. Cabrera Infante called it `the first great surrealist film', and if there is a theme present in the surrealist imagination (and for that matter, in the literary one), then surely it is that of the Double, the *Doppelganger* (who from Doctor Jekyll to *Kagemusha,* from the *Prisoner of Zenda* to *Persona,* has trod a royal path through the history of the medium). In *Vertigo,* the theme is even reflected in the doubling-up of details: Madeleine's look towards the tower (the first scene of San Juan Bautista, looking right, while Scottie kisses her) and the line `Too late' which accompanies it have a precise meaning for the naive spectator, unaware of the stratagem, but another meaning, just as precise, for a watchful spectator seeing it a second time. The look and the line are repeated at the very end, in a shot exactly symmetrical with the first, by Scottie, looking left, `Too late', just before Judy falls. For as there is an Other of the Other, there is also a Double of the Double. The right profile of the first revelation, when Madeleine momentarily stands still behind Scottie at Ernie's, the moment which decides everything, is repeated at the beginning of the second part, so precisely that it's Scottie who, the second time, is `in front' of Judy. Thus begins a play of mirrors which can only end in their destruction. We, the audience, discover the stratagem via the letter Judy doesn't send. Scottie discovers it at the end via the necklace. (Note that this moment also has its double: Scottie has just seen the necklace head-on and hasn't reacted. He only reacts when he sees it in the mirror.) In between, Scottie's attraction for Judy, who at first was merely a fourth case of mistaken identity (the constant of a love touched by death; see Proust) Scottie encountered in his search through the places of their past, this attraction has crystallized with her profile in front of the window ('Do I remind you of her?') in that green neon light, for which Hitchcock, it seems, specially chose the Empire Hotel: her left profile. This is the moment when Scottie crosses to the other side of the mirror and his folly is born ...

... If one believes, that is, the apparent intentions of the authors (authors in

the plural because the writer, Samuel Taylor, was largely Alfred's accomplice). The ingenious stratagem, the way of making us understand we've been hoodwinked, the stroke of genius of revealing the truth to us well before the hero, the whole thing bathed in the light of an *amour fou,* `fixed' by what Cabrera (who should know) called the `decadent *habaneras'* of Bernard Herrman - all that isn't bad. But what if *they* were lying to us as well? Resnais liked to say that nothing forces us to believe the heroine of *Hiroshima.* She could be making up everything she says. The flashbacks aren't the affirmations of the writer, but stories told by a character. All we know about Scottie at the beginning of the second part is that he is in a state of total catatonia, that he is `somewhere else', that it `could last a long time' (according to the doctor), that he loved a dead woman `and still does' (according to Midge). Is it too absurd to imagine that this agonizing, though reasonable, and obstinate soul ('hard-hitting' says Gavin), imagined this totally extravagant scenario, full of unbelievable coincidences and entanglements, yet logical enough to drive one to the one salvatory conclusion: this woman is not dead, I can find her again?

There are many arguments in favour of a dream reading of the second part of *Vertigo.* The disappearance of Barbara Bel Geddes (Midge, his friend and confidante, secretly in love with him) is one of them. I know very well that she married a rich Texan oilman in the meantime, and is preparing a dreadful reappearance as a widow in the Ewing clan; but still, her disappearance from *Vertigo* is probably unparalleled in the serial economy of Hollywood scripts. A character important for half the film disappears without trace - there isn't even an allusion to her in the subsequent dialogue - until the end of the second part. In the dream reading of the film, this absence would only be explained by her last line to Scottie in the hospital: `You don't even know I'm here ... '

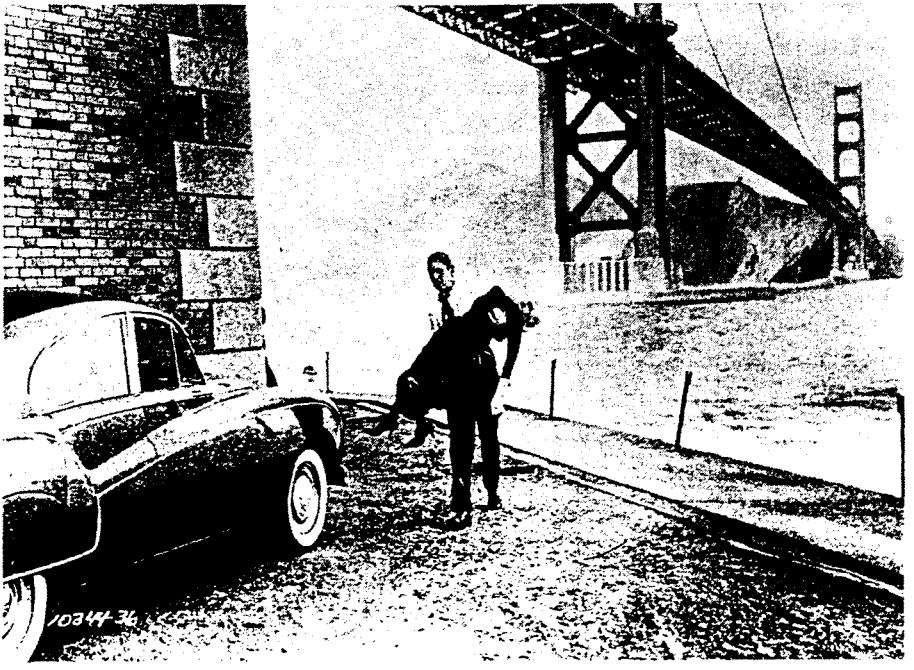
In this case, the entire second part would be nothing but a fantasy, revealing at last the double of the double. We were tricked into believing that the first part was the truth, then told it was a lie born of a perverse mind, that the second part contained the truth. But what if the first part really were the truth and the second the product of a sick mind? In that case, what one may find overcharged and outrageously expressionistic in the nightmare images preceding the hospital room would be nothing but a trick, yet another red herring, camouflaging the fantasy that will occupy us for another hour in order to lead us even further away from the appearance of realism. The only exception to this is the moment I've already mentioned, the change of set during the kiss. In this light, the scene acquires a new meaning: it's a fleeting confession, a revealing detail, the blink of a madman's eyelids as his eyes glaze over, the kind of gaze which sometimes gives a madman away.

There used to be a special effect in old movies where a character would detach himself from his sleeping or dead body, and his transparent form would float up to the sky or into the land of dreams. In the mirror play of *Vertigo*

Vertigo: the spiral of Madeleine's hair.

there is a similar moment, if in a more subtle form: in the clothes store when Judy, realizing that Scottie is transforming her piece by piece into Madeleine (in other words, into the reality he isn't deemed to know, making her repeat what she did for Elster), makes to go, and bumps into *a mirror.* Scottie joins her in front of the mirror and, while he's dictating to an amazed shop assistant the details of one of Madeleine's dresses, a fabulous shot shows us `all four of them' together: him and his double, her and her double. At that moment, Scottie has truly escaped from his hospital chair: there are two Scotties as well as two Judys. We can therefore add schizophrenia to the illnesses whose symptoms others have already judiciously identified in Scottie's behaviour. Personally, though, I'd leave out necrophilia, so often mentioned, which seems to me more indicative of a critic's neurosis than the character's: Scottie continues to love a truly living Madeleine. In his madness, he looks for proof in her life.

It's all very well reasoning like this, but one must also return to the appearance of the facts, obstinate as they are. There is a crushing argument in favour of a phantasmagoric reading of the second part. When, after the transformation and the hallucination, Madeleine/Judy, with the blitheness of a satisfied body, gets ready for dinner and Scottie asks her what restaurant she'd like to go to, she immediately suggests Ernie's. It's the place where they first met (but Scottie isn't meant to know this yet - Judy's careless `It's our place' is the first



Vertigo: the Golden Gate Bridge.

give-away before the necklace). So they go there *without making a reservation.* Just try doing this in San Francisco and you'll understand we're in a dream.

As Gavin says, San Francisco has changed. During a screening at Berkeley in the early eighties, when everyone had forgotten the movie (the old fox had kept the rights in order to sell them at a premium to TV, hence the cuts for commercials and the changed ending) and the word was that it was just another minor thriller, I remember the audience gasping with amazement on seeing the panoramic view of the city which opens the second part. It's another city, without skyscrapers (apart from Coppola's Sentinel Building), a picture as dated as the engraving Scottie looks at when Elster first pronounces those two fateful words. And it was only twenty years ago ... San Francisco, of course, is nothing but another character in the film. Samuel Taylor wrote to me agreeing that Hitchcock liked the town but only knew `what he saw from hotels or restaurants or out of the limo window'. He was `what you might call a sedentary person'. But he still decided to use the Dolores Mission and, strangely, to make the house on Lombard Street Scottie's home `because of the *red* door'. Taylor was in love with his city (Alex Coppel, the first writer, was `a transplanted Englishman') and put all his love into the script; and perhaps even more than that, if I am to believe a rather cryptic phrase at the end of his letter: `I rewrote the script at the same time that I explored San Francisco and recaptured my past ... 'Words which could apply as much to the characters as

to the authors and which afford us another interpretation, like an added flat to a key, of the direction given by Elster to Scottie at the start of the film, when he's describing Madeleine's wanderings; the pillars Scottie gazes at for so long on the other side of Lloyd Lake - the *Portals of the Past*. This personal note would explain many things: the *amour fou*, the dream signs, all the things that make *Vertigo* a film which is both typically and untypically Hitchcockian in relation to the rest of his work, the work of a perfect cynic. Cynical to the point of adding for television - an anxiously moral medium, as we all know - a new ending to the film: Scottie reunited with Midge and the radio reporting Elster's arrest. Crime doesn't pay.

Ten years later, time has continued to work its effect. What used to mean San Francisco for me is disappearing fast. The spiral of time, like Saul Bass's spiral in the credit sequence, the spiral of Madeleine's hair and Carlotta's in the portrait, cannot stop swallowing up the present and enlarging the contours of the past. The Empire Hotel has become the York and lost its green neon lights; the McKittrick Hotel, the Victorian house where Madeleine disappears like a ghost (another inexplicable detail if we ignore the dream-reading: what of the hotel's mysterious janitress? `A paid accomplice' was Hitchcock's reply to Truffaut. Come on, Alfred!) has been replaced by a school built of concrete. But Ernie's restaurant is still there, as is Podesta Baldocchi's flower-shop with its tiled mosaics where one proudly remembers Kim Novak choosing a bouquet. The cross-section of sequoia is still at the entrance to Muir Woods, on the other side of the bay. The Botanical Gardens were less fortunate: they are now parked underground. (*Vertigo* could almost be shot in the same locations, unlike its remake in Paris.) The Veterans' Museum is still there, as is the cemetery at the Dolores Mission and San Juan Bautista, south of another mission, where Hitchcock added (by an optical effect) a high tower, the real one being so low you'd hardly sprain an ankle falling off it, complete with stable, carriages and stuffed horse used in the film just as they are in life. And of course, there's Fort Point, under the Golden Gate Bridge, which he wanted to cover with birds at the end of *The Birds*. The *Vertigo* tour is now obligatory for lovers of San Francisco. Even the Pope, pretending otherwise, visited two locations: the Golden Gate Bridge and (under the pretext of kissing an AIDS patient) the Dolores Mission. Whether one accepts the dream reading or not, the power of this once ignored film has become a commonplace, proving that the idea of resurrecting a lost love can touch any human heart, whatever he or she may say. `You're my second chance!' cries Scottie as he drags Judy up the stairs of the tower. No one now wants to interpret these words in their superficial sense, meaning his vertigo has been conquered. It's about reliving a moment lost in the past, about bringing it back to life only to lose it again. One does not resurrect the dead, one doesn't look back at Eurydice. Scottie experiences the greatest joy a man can imagine, a second life, in exchange for

the greatest tragedy, a second death. What do video games, which tell us more about our unconscious than the works of Lacan, offer us? Neither money nor glory, but a new game. The possibility of playing again. `A second chance.' A free replay. And another thing: Madeleine tells Scottie she managed to find her way back to the house `by spotting the Coit Tower' - the tower which dominates the surrounding hills and whose name makes visiting French tourists laugh.I 'Well, it's the first time I ever had to thank the Coit Tower,' says Scottie, the blase San Franciscan. Madeleine would never find her way back today. The bushes have grown on Lombard Street, hiding all landmarks. The house itself, number goo, has changed. The new owners have got rid of (or the old owner kept) the cast-iron balcony with its Chinese inscription `Twin Happiness'. The door is still red, but now blessed with a notice which, in its way, is a tribute to Alfred: `Warning: Crime Watch'. And, from the steps where Kim Novak and James Stewart are first reunited, no one can see any more the tower `in the shape of a fire-hose', offered as a posthumous gift to the San Francisco Fire Brigade by a millionairess called Lilli *Hitchcock* Coit ...

Obviously, this text is addressed to those who know *Vertigo* by heart. But do those who don't deserve anything at all?